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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 05 BEIRUT 000411

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PARM PINR MCAP MASS SY IS LE
SUBJECT: LEBANON: UNIFIL COMMANDER REQUESTS ASSISTANCE FROM
USG ON GHAJAR VILLAGE, ISRAELI OVERFLIGHTS, AND CLUSTER
BOMBS

REF: A. USUN 222

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Classified By: Charge d'Afaires a.i. Michele J. Sison
for reasons 1.4 (b) nd (d).

SUMMARY

11. (S) In a March 21 introductory meeting with Charge, United Nations Interim Force In Lebanon (UNIFIL) Force Commander Graziano discussed a wide range of issues, but focused primarily on the difficulties posed by the continued Israeli occupation of Ghajar village inside Lebanon, the precipitous increase in Israeli overflights of Lebanon, and the lack of actionable Israeli information on the use of cluster bombs in Lebanon in the summer of 2006. The next UNIFIL-IDF-LAF tripartite meeting will take place April 2. End Summary.

12. (S) Charge and Defense Attache met with Major General Claudio Graziano March 21 at UNIFIL House in South Beirut. Dismissing Sheba'a Farms as too difficult to address at this time, Graziano's first topic was the Israeli occupation of Ghajar Village inside south Lebanon. Graziano characterized this occupation as "a permanent violation of UNSCR 1701." He assesses that this continuing occupation is undermining the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Prime Minister Siniora. According to Graziano, when Hizballah was in control of south Lebanon, the Israelis did not dare try to occupy the northern half of Ghajar. Now that Hizballah is north of the Litani and the LAF is in control, Israel maintains their position inside Ghajar. The argument from Hizballah is simple: "the Israelis were not in Ghajar when we were in charge; now, the LAF is too weak to do what we were able to accomplish."

ISRAELI OCCUPATION OF GHAJAR VILLAGE
A PERMANENT VIOLATION OF UNSCR 1701

13. (S) Graziano explained his proposal for Ghajar as one that is "possible to accomplish." He proposes that UNIFIL take over the northern half of Ghajar that is inside Lebanon.

Israel would continue to supply services to the village inhabitants. The LAF would not enter the village. This arrangement would remain in place until a final agreement was reached on the status of the 1,000 inhabitants that live north of the Blue Line in Ghajar Village. (Comment: Ghajar Village has approximately 1,750 inhabitants on both sides of the Blue Line. See Ref A for detailed information on Ghajar Village. End Comment.) Graziano said that this negotiation over the status of the inhabitants should be addressed carefully as it is a humanitarian issue to displace so many people whose citizenship is somewhat muddled.

ISRAELI OVERFLIGHTS ARE NOT HELPFUL;
DECREASE IN NUMBER AND TYPE WOULD HELP

14. (S) Graziano was very matter-of-fact concerning overflights. Recounting that Israel only ceased overflights during the months of June and July of 2000, Graziano does not think the Israelis will cease these operations. Graziano showed Charge a bar chart that catalogues the number of Israeli overflights over the last year. The graphic representation of the increase in overflights in February and March stood out markedly from the other months. UNIFIL uses the radars on their ships participating in the UNIFIL Maritime Task Force to record overflights whereas the LAF uses their radar at Beirut International to record overflights. (Comment: DATT noted that the difference in reported numbers from UNIFIL and the LAF was approximately ten percent, with the LAF numbers being slightly higher. This is could be due to the fact that UNIFIL only reports violations in the UNIFIL area of operations, whereas the LAF reports violations that occur over the entire airspace of Lebanon. See Ref C for recent reporting on Israeli overflights. End Comment.)

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15. (S) Graziano termed the overflights as provocative and undermining the credibility of UNIFIL, the LAF, and the Siniora government. Acknowledging that that the Israelis are not going to stop the overflights, Graziano asked the USG to intercede with Israel on changing the type and frequency of overflights. Graziano showed Charge photos of the Israeli drones that routinely fly over his UN positions and noted, "these are a lot less provocative and have more intelligence value than a jet." Graziano asked that the USG talk with Israel to cease the overflights using fighter aircraft. As a final thought, Graziano questioned 52 overflights being recorded recently on a single day. Graziano said he understood that Israel conducts the overflights to keep the pressure on Hizballah and to their search for their two soldiers, but also believes that there is a message of intimidation also being sent to Siniora.

HIZBALLAH'S POLICY IN SOUTH LEBANON:
WORK THE SYSTEM AND DON'T CONFRONT UNIFIL

16. (S) Graziano thinks that Hizballah is succeeding in supporting its political base in south Lebanon given the difficulties of 12,600 UNIFIL soldiers being present. Graziano assess that he has complete control of the open spaces in south Lebanon where he patrols, but the built up areas and urban areas are much more difficult. Since he is only operating under UNSC Chapter VI rules, Graziano's freedom of maneuver is greatly circumscribed. When it comes to confronting Hizballah in individual homes, he must seek LAF assistance, "which just is not there. They will not go against Hizballah like this."

17. (S) Graziano finds the Hizballah "good boy" policy in south Lebanon to be puzzling at the moment. He does not think they would ever shoot a UNIFIL soldier because Europe would uniformly condemn them as a terrorist organization and cut off all dialogue with them. Instead, they are "playing by the

rules" in an attempt to take power through the political process, he believes. Since Hizballah's not authorized to operate south of the Litani River, they are focusing their military efforts north of the Litani, said Graziano.

HIZBALLAH NOT LOOKING FOR A WAR NOW
LAF INTELLIGENCE FABRICATING REPORTS

¶ 8. (S) Graziano does not think that Hizballah is looking for a war with Israel right now. Instead, he thinks that Hizballah wants Israel to strike first, i.e. a preventative attack. This way, Hizballah will immediately be recognized by the international community as a legitimate "resistance" to Israeli aggression. Graziano assessed that the international law of land warfare would support this type of interpretation for any Israeli action inside Lebanon where Hizballah responds.

¶ 9. (S) As proof that Hizballah is not looking to launch a war with Israel in the near term, Graziano recounted recent Hizballah assistance in calming the situation on the border. According to the Graziano, BG Abduruhman Shehaitly, the Shia LAF Deputy G-2 and Prime Minister Siniora's Representative to UNIFIL, has apparently been fabricating stories about Israeli violations of the Blue Line in the last three weeks. Reports of this alleged incidents have appeared in the press and had been elevated to the level of Minister of Defense Elias Murr, said Graziano. Murr had contacted the chief of Hizballah security, who denied that any such violations have occurred. It is unclear why the LAF G-2 (Lebanon's Directorate of Military Intelligence) would support such a disinformation campaign; Graziano is meeting with LAF G-2 BG Georges Khoury on 3/22 to discuss these reports. According to Graziano, Hizballah wants to win the propaganda war, but they do not want to elevate the pressure to a level that will result in hostilities with Israel. (Note: Charge and DATT will also see BG Shehaitly 3/22. End Note.)

BIGGEST CONCERN IS ROCKETS INTO ISRAEL--
THEY WILL COME FROM SUNNI EXTREMISTS

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¶ 10. (S) Graziano told us that his biggest concern is rockets being fired into Israel. As such he has launched aggressive counter rocket launching operations in the UNIFIL area of operation. During the hours of darkness, every vehicle that is within 10 kilometers of the border is stopped and searched. These operations are carried out jointly with the LAF as UNIFIL does not have the authority to search cars independently unless they can see weapons in the car. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) have informed Graziano that these operations have already stopped two rocket launches that were about to happen. Graziano enjoys a close friendship with the IDF General in command of Israel's northern region as they attended the U.S. Army War College together. Graziano thinks that the primary group that will launch rockets will be Palestinian extremists and/or Al Qaeda operatives in Lebanon.

"STRATEGIC REVIEW" WITH LAF FORTHCOMING
WILL FOCUS ON LAF REQUIREMENTS
AND CONTROL OF LITANI RIVER

¶ 11. (S) Beginning on April 1, Graziano will open a "strategic review" dialogue with LAF Commander Michel Sleiman. The purpose of this review will be to address LAF military needs and requirements to accomplish their missions as "the LAF is a central pillar for the implementation of UNSCR 1701." Lamenting that the United Nations is not able to donate equipment and material to the LAF, Graziano ventured that his daily, direct interaction with the 6,500 LAF troops in the south offers him some insight as to what the LAF needs.

¶12. (S) One of the LAF's greatest needs at this time is fuel, he emphasized. On a recent mission, LAF South of the Litani Commander BG Boulous Mattar, was unable to send troops to respond as they had no fuel for their vehicles. This lack of fuel continues to hinder LAF capability to conduct security operations in south Lebanon. Graziano asked Charge if the USG could seek international assistance to acquire fuel for the LAF. "It really is a critical situation," remarked Graziano. In addition to not having fuel, Graziano remarked that the LAF lacks airplanes or helicopters that give them the capability to secure the south. "As long as Hizballah is stronger than the LAF, they (the LAF) will never fully be in charge," said Graziano.

¶13. (S) A secondary purpose of the Strategic Review will be to discuss ways to better control crossing points along the Litani River. Graziano told us that Sleiman "does not answer to PM Siniora anymore" and that Sleiman seeks "cover" from the various politicians. In the case of south Lebanon, Sleiman is deriving all of his political authority from Speaker of Parliament Nabbi Berri, judged Graziano. Graziano and Sleiman hope to find ways to more effectively control these border crossings. The next UNIFIL-IDF-LAF tripartite meeting will take place April 2, delayed by a week as Graziano will again travel to New York, this time to address UNIFIL budget issues on March 26.

THERE IS NO BLUE LINE AT SEA
ISRAELI WARSHIP ENTERED LEBANESE WATERS

¶14. (S) Graziano gave a brief overview of Blue Line (BL) marking operations and described some of the resistance by both sides regarding BL marking. Graziano said that he continues to push forward with this operation in order to fulfill the UNSCR 1701 mandate. Regarding the area of Sheba'a Farms, Graziano explained that this part of the marking will most likely be carried out only by UNIFIL as Israel does not want to prejudice negotiations with Syria in that area.

¶15. (S) After describing a BL process that appears to be working, albeit slowly, Graziano said that the lack of a BL mandate at sea is problematic. International conventions on territorial waters (TTW) use a perpendicular line to

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demarcate the TTW between neighboring countries. In the case of the border between Israel and Lebanon, this imaginary line would be on a heading of 270 degrees. When Israel was occupying south Lebanon, they built a line of buoys off the coast on a heading of 290 degrees. These buoys are clearly visible and are the source of much debate by the UNIFIL Maritime Task Force (MTF).

¶16. (S) According to Graziano, the 290 heading of the buoys provided protection for the Israeli resort town that is just on the south side of the border with Lebanon. The fishing waters around these waters are especially rich in fish and Lebanese fishermen are often harassed by the permanent Israeli naval presence along this line of buoys. Graziano is surprised that this issue is never addressed in the UNSCR 1701 mandate renewal process.

¶17. (S) In any event, Graziano says that both sides usually respect the line of buoys and do not cross. However, on 3/17, the UNIFIL MTF identified an Israeli warship north of the buoys. Based on its radar signature, which Graziano says is distinct for every ship in the world, the Israeli Corvette Class Ship ELIOT, a 1,200 ton ship, crossed the line of buoys not far from shore, turned west, and continued out to sea for a half and hour before turning back south into Israeli TTW. Graziano intends to talk with the Israelis in a bilateral meeting 3/30 in Tel Aviv about this incident. Graziano described this incident as "out of the ordinary" and it could

simply be a navigation error on the part of the ELIOT's captain as there was fog that morning.

CLUSTER BOMB STRIKE DATA FROM ISRAEL:
"WHAT WE RECEIVED IS NOT USEFUL"

¶18. (S) Graziano said that he still has "not received a proper answer" on the subject of cluster bombs. Graziano sketched out a rough diagram of how the cluster bomb data from Israel was delivered to the United Nations Mine Action Coordination Center (UNMACC) in Tyre, Lebanon. A grid system of ten kilometer by ten kilometer squares was drawn on the map. Based on this grid system, the Israelis gave them data based on a "statistical probability that the rounds landed in this box."

¶19. (S) Graziano told us that he has spoken with IDF Chief of General Staff Lieutenant General Gabi Ashkenazi recently and requested more fidelity on the cluster bomb strike data. Specifically, Graziano asked Ashkenazi for strike data at the same level of detail that was provided in Kosovo. Graziano told us that Ashkenazi told him the IDF does not have the data. Graziano assesses that the IDF is either 1) reluctant to provide the data, or 2) they had "no discipline" in the last ten days of the war in 2006 and shot cluster bombs at everything in sight.

¶20. (S) According to UNMACC officials, impact location data has to be entered into fire control systems to tell the rockets when to release their cluster munitions. Without entering grid coordinates, the rockets will not fire without overriding the system. If the fire control system is manually overridden, the rockets will fly to their maximum range of thirty kilometer and then dispel their sub-munitions. Based on the concentrated nature of cluster munitions strikes, according to UNMACC, the strike data was entered into a fire control computer at some point in time. It is this data that that the humanitarian demining effort in Lebanon requires.

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS IN THE LAF,
A POSSIBLE CHANGE IN THE LAF G-2

¶21. (S) Graziano related a recent rumor he has been hearing about morale in the LAF. Graziano has heard that the number of soldiers resigning from the army is on the rise, especially over the past three weeks. The purported reason for the large number of resignations is troop fatigue. LAF troops in the south have been continuously deployed for eighteen months with no time off or home leave authorized.

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This spate of resignations is not unique to soldiers in the south. It is also happening in other parts of the army where units have been continually deployed for the last three years, he noted. (Comment: The increase in LAF missions since the assassination of Rafic Hariri has been exponential. At the same time, the LAF abandoned the draft and there have been no additional resources allocated to the LAF by the Lebanese government. As such, the remaining troops are continuously deployed and have few leave opportunities. In addition to this, there are no morale facilities in the rather spartan deployment locations for the LAF Brigades. With little chance for leave and even less opportunity for recreation, an increase in resignations would appear completely plausible, and troubling, to us. We will take a closer look at this over the next few weeks. End Comment.)

¶22. (S) Another rumor that Graziano has heard recently is that the LAF G-2 position, normally held by a Maronite Christian, may be handed over to a Shia officer as part of a package political deal. In exchange, the Maronites would get the lead position of General Security. Specifically, Graziano has heard that Staff Colonel Abbas Ibrahim, the Shia G-2 for South Lebanon, may be tapped as the next LAF G-2.

(Note: We know Colonel Ibrahim well and he has been helpful on the issue of the Ain Al Hilweh refugee camp. End Note.)

GRAZIANO'S PRIORITIES FOR ASSISTANCE FROM THE USG
GHAJAR VILLAGE, OVERFLIGHTS, CLUSTER BOMB STRIKE DATA

¶123. (S) In closing, Graziano wanted to ensure that we understood his priorities for assistance. In order, they are 1) resolving Ghajar Village issue, 2) reducing Israeli overflights and changing the platforms used, and 3) acquiring the cluster bomb strike data from Israel. Graziano thinks that resolution of the Ghajar village problem is achievable. He does not think the Israelis will stop overflights, so he is hopeful that their number and type can be reduced so that they are not so inflammatory. As for the cluster bomb strike data, Graziano continued to express his bewilderment at the lack of data, but he is not hopeful that the Israelis will provide the data any time soon.

COMMENT AND ACTION REQUEST

¶124. (S) We came away with the sense that Graziano's assessments of issues on the ground are sound. He is not prone to hyperbole, as are so many of our contacts with issues related to Israel. Embassy shares Graziano's view that an Israeli withdrawal from northern Ghajar, in accordance with UNSCR 1701, would provide a huge political boost for the Siniora government at a time when Hizballah continues to undermine the Siniora government's credibility by citing this continued Israeli occupation of Lebanese territory.

SISON